

FEMINISM

and the

FEMALE BODY

Liberating
the Amazon
Within

Shirley Castelnovo & Sharon R. Guthrie

GENDER & POLITICAL THEORY: NEW CONTEXTS

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FEMINISM

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Gender and Political Theory: New Contexts

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To my mother and father, Ruth and Keith, for whom I hold the
highest respect and from whom I learned the importance of
maintaining mind-body balance in life's pursuits;

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support during some times when I needed it the most; and

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S. R. G.

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S. C.

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Introduction

This book is the vision and blending of two women from two seemingly disparate disciplines—political science and sport studies—and dissimilar backgrounds: one of us (Sharon) grew up with an emphasis on the physical dimension of living (i.e., participation in sport), the other (Shirley), on the mental. What seemed like a difficult task at first—merging our academic interests and talents—was made easier by the fact that we are both feminists and are empowered by resistant activity. It was also facilitated by Shirley's experience of weight training during the past eight years, which has allowed her to understand self-efficacy as an embodied experience in which the mind and body are intimately connected.

The book is the expression of our desire for a culture in which women are free to actualize and express their powers—both physical and mental—in directions of their own choosing and, more important, a culture in which they feel safe enough to do so. We envision this culture as one in which equality between women and men is a reality instead of just a well-intentioned plan and one in which women have respect for each other as women, regardless of the life journey each has selected. Although some of our friends, colleagues, and students are convinced that we live in such a culture today, at least in the so-called advanced Western societies, we do not believe this is the case.

This book is about cultivating and celebrating an Amazonian presence among women. But first, a question needs to be answered: What do we mean by the word *Amazon*? An Amazon is a woman who is not afraid to empower herself mentally or physically. She is a woman who, while identified with Western culture, has been present throughout history, often being feared, hated, and desired simultaneously: feared and hated because she is a reminder that women are more powerful than many men and women would like them to be; desired because there are others who love, respect, and are fascinated by all that women can be.

The Amazon is a woman who we believe can successfully challenge, and thus help transform, domination related to gender, race, class, age, disability,

and sexual orientation. She knows that as long as women are oppressed, they will never actualize their full potential. Although she understands that oppression is a complex, interlocking web of factors, making analysis and collaborative resistance among diverse women difficult, she perceives the possibility of coalition building among them.

An Amazon is a warrior, but not necessarily a warrior with a blade or gun in hand. Her warriorlike qualities stem from the fact that she has developed her bodily and mental skills to their fullest capacity, and she directs her energies toward achieving equality for women. Consequently, she has the power and commitment to equalize the fields on which hierarchical gender relations are played out. Moreover, because she is aware of the need to protect herself physically, she has the potential to minimize, if not eliminate, the physical power imbalances between herself and the men with whom she interacts; and she knows that, when necessary, she has the right to defend herself. She is a woman who represents a significant challenge to patriarchal domination.

It is important to note, however, that although the Amazon reflects mind-body excellence, we do not perceive her as a symbol of normative physical beauty and strength or mental development. That is, she does not encourage women to model themselves in accordance with one "superior" mold. Rather, she symbolizes the unleashing of each woman's potential, taking into account her individual circumstances (e.g., age, disability, and financial resources).

No book about liberating Amazonian potential would be whole without a serious discussion of feminism because feminism has been responsible for changing the ways society perceives women and, more significantly, how women perceive themselves. The work of feminists is not yet over, however, nor are all of the battles to achieve women's rights. In fact, we believe that a feminist movement should continue for as long as necessary, well into the twenty-first century and perhaps beyond, to positively affect the lives and status of women from diverse backgrounds. Because we view criticism as a needed impetus to improvement, we identify problems that we perceive in contemporary feminist theory and praxis, problems that we believe weaken feminism's ability to flourish into the future. One of these problems is dualistic thinking, which privileges the mind over the body and mental activities over those that are physical. Such ideology makes it difficult to sustain praxis that facilitates an integrated mind-body approach to women's liberation and thus embodied Amazonian transformations.

During the 1980s and 1990s, we grew weary as we attended conference after conference and read manuscript after manuscript that called for dualistic strategies in preparing women for the twenty-first century. The general theme has been and continues to be empowerment through cognition,

becoming aware, and raising one's consciousness. As children of the Enlightenment, this sounds entirely reasonable. If we can just become mentally aware and rational enough, somehow we can free ourselves. Isn't it true, though, that oppression is also embodied, for example, in physical postures and gestures? Further, consider how the ideals of Western feminine body beauty are deeply associated with vulnerability, in both appearance and reality, as well as condensed, constricted movements, particularly in public spaces. Empowering the mind, although vastly important as a liberatory strategy, seemed to us, therefore, only a partial solution.

We have also attended conferences and read works in which it is not uncommon to hear the contrary: Empowering the physical dimension of women (e.g., through sport) is a surefire solution to achieving a strong identity. Intuitively and from experience, we knew that somatic empowerment by itself was not the answer either. Although sport is a feminist experience in many ways, the experience does not automatically cultivate a feminist consciousness. In fact, because of the depressingly long history of culturally imbedded heterosexism and homophobia in women's sport, it may in fact do the reverse: minimize feminist thought. So again, we were challenged with the question: how do we dismantle the negative impact of patriarchy in our lives?

Following the lead of feminist theorists who have been intent on unveiling the patriarchal construction of women's bodies, we turned to the works of Michel Foucault. His notion of power-knowledge was an enormously powerful analytical tool in terms of understanding the shaping of bodies. We discovered, however, as have other feminists, that relying on Foucaultian analysis and its inherent assumptions results in an inquiry that emphasizes the deterministic and oppressive role of social structures and groups and the relativistic nature of values. This in turn leads to individually, personally achieved liberatory strategies as opposed to those that are collective in nature.

Our research on female bodybuilders and martial artists did not fit neatly into this Foucaultian paradigm. Most notably, the women in our research studies exhibited a far more instrumental response to social institutions and practices than the Foucaultian perspective allows. Our examination of the martial artists further revealed that when women seek solutions to commonly experienced social problems in a cohesive group setting, they often assess social norms and institutions collectively. That is, they make collective judgments. They also seek collective, as opposed to individual, liberatory strategies to end what they evaluate as oppressive practices. Lastly, their understanding of their interactions in and with the world are complex, far more complex than the Foucaultian zero-sum power game predicts. Thus, although Foucaultian logic is helpful in delineating the structural components of the patriarchal constructions of women's bodies,

it has discouraged collective feminist political actions. Integrating a feminist version of Maurice Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology with Foucault's structuralism thus became critical in our efforts to develop an analytic bridge from individual to collective resistance.

Ultimately, this book is about our hopes for the future of women and feminism, based on our examination of the ways in which feminism has affected the lives of women. Our analytical framework, a work in progress, represents an effort to develop feminist social and political theory in ways that illuminate our empirical work examining women's experiential accounts of their bodies and themselves.

In Chapter 1, we discuss current trends in feminist theory; in particular, how the dominance of postmodern feminism during the 1990s has undercut the development of large-scale feminist goals. Postmodern feminism's emphasis on the differences among women has led to the dissolution of "women as a group" and the reinforcement of identity politics. This makes a real-world feminist politics—that is, coalitions of differently identified women working together on liberatory projects—difficult to achieve because perceptions of differences and separation, rather than commonalities and unity, are encouraged. The potential power of women in terms of their large numbers is thus divided, and often their energies are directed against each other.

In Chapter 2, we note another ongoing problem associated with feminism: the philosophical perspective of dualism. Feminists have meticulously noted the negative impact of dualism on women's socioeconomic and political status and have made grand efforts to overcome such thinking in theory. In contrast, their liberatory strategies are almost always mentalistic in nature, that is, they call for women to think their way to emancipation. As a result, the importance of the body and bodily experience in becoming free of oppression is often overlooked or disregarded. We suggest that this omission may be explained in part by an unexamined homophobic fear among feminists of physically powerful women. Whether or not this is true, we see dualism as a serious shortcoming that we have done our best to overcome in our own work. We also examine the feminist fascination with the female bodybuilder, who is seen by some as an icon of resistance and by others as a reflection of patriarchal dominance. We examine the reasons for these contradictory theoretical interpretations, one of which we believe is their emphasis on individual, as opposed to collective, liberatory strategies.

In Chapter 3, we begin charting our efforts to develop a nondualistic feminist theory and liberatory strategy, one that integrates the mind and the body. We have done this by (1) conducting research on competitive female bodybuilders, among whom we hoped to find some exemplars of Amazonian (mind-body) feminism, and (2) combining the ideas of Michel

Foucault and Maurice Merleau-Ponty to ground theoretically the findings we derived from this research.

In Chapter 4, we further discuss our intellectual-somatic journey, highlighting our research at Thousand Waves, a feminist martial arts dojo in Chicago for women only. After studying and participating in *seido* karate at Thousand Waves, we became even more convinced that feminist strategies should be mind-body related. We also found many Amazons—women who not only subscribe to feminist principles but also embody them. This work confirmed our earlier belief that feminist liberatory strategies should focus on collective approaches involving the body as well as the mind.

In Chapter 5, we note the curious omission of the female sporting body and feminist sport scholarship from mainstream feminist theory. Certainly within the world of women's sports, there are many examples of women transgressing patriarchal boundaries, some of them Amazons as we conceptualize them. After examining some of the extensive work of feminist sport studies scholars, we explore the reasons that mainstream feminists have ignored or disregarded this power-packed domain. We also discuss the benefits to be gained from an infusion of feminist sport scholarship into mainstream feminist theory.

Chapter 6 examines an area that has been even more neglected by feminist theorists: disability. This omission, which is not simply a short-coming of feminist theory, tells us something significant about the general response of American culture to bodies that depart radically from youthful "normative" ones. Is there something about the disabled body that evokes fear and thus makes the exploration of disability difficult to consider? Is disability the secular version of purgatory? Does the ultimate existential crisis in American society involve the prospect of having to accept passively the loss of bodily and often mental autonomy? In this chapter, we address questions such as these. We also examine the social construction of disability from a variety of perspectives and note that women with disabilities can provide a radically transgressive challenge to patriarchal constructions of the female body. We therefore argue for an integration of the experiences of women with disabilities into feminist theorizing and praxis.

Chapter 7 examines whether coalition building among diversely identified women is possible in this era of identity politics. We explore various definitions of identity (e.g., personal, group, official, and political) using the example of the Mashpee Indians. We also reflect on the production of a new identity classification—multiracial—as a way of further enriching our understanding of the nature and production of identity. Our research at Thousand Waves suggests the possibility of coalition building among diversely identified women; it also demonstrates that, like identity, coalition

building is a process facilitated by activities and experiences that enhance mind-body efficacy. We contend that Thousand Waves can serve as a model for revisioning and restructuring local and national feminist organizations. We believe that this revisioning is necessary if feminism and feminist politics are to prosper into the twenty-first century and continue fostering a culture in which Amazonian transformations are possible.

Those readers who are interested in our own research on female bodybuilders and the martial artists may wish to start with Chapters 3 and 4. These chapters provide the basis for one of the central themes of this book—the importance of distinguishing between individually motivated empowerment, which is exemplified by most of our female bodybuilders, and the collective feminist resistance demonstrated by the martial artists at Thousand Waves. The fascination with bodybuilding by feminist theorists reflects the postmodern focus on individual resistance and empowerment. In contrast, our case study of female martial artists represents a radically destabilizing, collective model of feminist social change.

1

The Feminist Wars

A funny thing happened at the end of the glorious feminist-theory wars of the 1990s. Perhaps it wasn't funny at all, or shouldn't have been, not to a group of individuals who are clearly the primary defenders of women's rights and women's equality with men. This battle among feminists appeared strangely similar to the long-standing theoretical wars waged to sustain male dominance because the contested site, as well as the prize, was definition and control of the female body.

The adversaries in this battle had aligned themselves with one of two theoretical camps: (1) essentialism (biological or humanistic) and (2) postmodernism, also known as social constructionism and poststructuralism. When the battle ended, the postmodernists emerged as winners. At the time, celebration must have been in order. In retrospect, however, this was only a Pyrrhic victory. Why? Because the postmodern triumph, ironically, has undermined the potential of feminism to establish a political agenda in the real, nonacademic world, an agenda that can empower the lives of all women, not just feminist scholars who are trying to climb the academic ladder.

Two shortcomings of feminist theorizing produced this hollow ending: (1) the emergence and subsequent dominance of postmodernism's critique of female subjectivity and (2) mind-body dualism, which has been an ongoing characteristic of most of feminist liberatory theory. In this chapter, we examine the differences between the postmodern and the essentialist (biological and humanist) positions on female subjectivity and universal theorizing, as well as the impact of the postmodern perspective of multiple female identities on feminist theory and praxis. We then assess the emerging splits within the women's movement using as examples the anti-pornography campaign, the sexual harassment issue in the U.S. Senate hearings involving Anita Hill, and the domestic violence dimension in the murder of Nicole Brown Simpson. Our discussion of dualism is more fully analyzed in Chapter 2.

The initial feminist assault on the notion of female subjectivity began with the accusation that the female subject of feminist theory was white,

middle-class, and heterosexual. Indeed, women of color, lesbians, and Third World women had long proclaimed their exclusion from such theorizing and were writing their own narratives. Feminist scholars began taking note of the homogenization of feminist theory and sought intellectual support for their evolving critique, which they found in the writings of French postmodernists such as Michel Foucault, Jacques Lacan, and Jacques Derrida. Central to the views of these male postmodernists is their skepticism regarding the Enlightenment view of humans as autonomous and reasonable beings who are capable of making principled decisions. They argued that the notion of a universal human nature, in particular the belief that all human beings are potentially autonomous, rational, and capable of developing a universal code of morality, is in fact an ideology invented by Western imperialistic nations to legitimate their dominance. Postmodernists maintained that human beings are socially constructed and that factors such as race, class, age, ethnicity, and sexual orientation, set within particular sociohistorical periods, are critical in the construction of identity.

Many feminist theorists whose work was initially driven by questioning the universal narratives of Western male scholars began to identify themselves as postmodernists and to apply the postmodern critique to feminist theory. These postmodernists claimed that feminist theory had been premised on a universal notion of female subjectivity, which ultimately grounded it in the hegemonic norms and values of Western civilization and, more significantly, that there is no universal female nature or female sexuality. They thus established gender—the sociohistorical construction of designated sex differences—as their critical theoretical construct and emphasized differences among women in terms of class, race, ethnicity, and sexual orientation. If a published book or article could not address all of these differences, which typically was the case, then the need to add them to future examinations and analyses became part of the ritualistic disclaimer accompanying the conclusions of such works.

This emphasis on differences rather than similarities among women emerged from its postmodern roots to become widely accepted in feminist circles. At first there seemed to be a celebration of the uniqueness of women's individual life narratives. Unfortunately, this "differences approach" led to a despairing sense that each woman's suffering was her own unfortunate fate and that any change would require solutions on the part of an individual woman or, at best, some cooperation among women who shared exactly the same life characteristics. As a result, a women's "group agenda" became politically incorrect and suspect. Without intention or malice, postmodernists had undermined the continuation of a women's movement and, with it, the anger and moral conviction that demands and justifies specific changes in the status of women.